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The Yellow Claw

By SAX ROHMER

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(Continued)

I ran into my bedroom and slipped on my dressing gown, leaving Mr. Leroux in the entrance hall. Then, with the clock chiming the last stroke of midnight, we came out together, and I closed my door behind me. There was no light on the stair. But our conversation—Mr. Leroux was speaking in a very high pitched voice.

"What was he saying?"

"He was explaining to me how some woman unknown to him had interrupted his work a few minutes before by ringing his doorbell."

Inspector Dunbar held up his hand. "I won't ask you to repeat what he said, doctor. Mr. Leroux presently can give me his own words."

"We had descended to this floor, then," resumed Cumberly, "when Mr. Exel, entering below, called up to us asking if anything was the matter. Leroux replied: 'Matter, Exel! There's a devil of a business. For mercy's sake come up.'"

"Well?"

"Mr. Exel thereupon joined us at the door of this flat."

"Was it open?"

"Yes. Mr. Leroux had rushed up to me, leaving the door open behind him. The light was out both in the lobby and in the study, a fact upon which I commented at the time. It was all the more curious as Mr. Leroux had left both lights on."

"Did he say so?"

"He did. The circumstances surprised him to a marked degree. We came in, and I turned up the light in the lobby. Then Leroux, entering the study, turned up the light there too. I entered next, followed by Mr. Exel, and we saw the body lying where you see it now."

"Who saw it first?"

"Mr. Leroux. He drew my attention to it, saying that he had left her lying on the chesestuff and not upon the floor."

"You examined her?"

"I did. She was dead, but still warm. She exhibited signs of recent illness and of being addicted to some drug habit, probably morphine. This, beyond doubt, contributed to her death, but the direct cause was asphyxiation. She had been strangled!"

"My God!" groaned Leroux, dropping his face into his hands.

"You found marks on her throat?"

"The marks were very slight. No great pressure was required in her weak condition."

"You did not move the body?"

"Certainly not. A more complete examination must be made, of course. But I extracted a piece of torn paper from her clenched right hand."

Inspector Dunbar lowered his tufted brows.

"I'm not glad to know you did that," he said. "It should have been left."

"It was done on the spur of the moment, but without altering the position of the hand or arm. The paper lies upon the table yonder."

Inspector Dunbar took a long drink. Thus far he had made no attempt to examine the victim. Pulling out a bidding note case from the inside pocket of his blue serge coat, he unscrewed a fountain pen, carefully tested the nib upon his thumb nail and made three or four brief entries. Then, stretching out one long arm, he laid the wallet and the pen beside his glass.

"It is Soames" came the weary voice of Leroux.

"Butler?"

"Yes."

"Where's he been?"

"I don't know. He remained out without my permission."

"He did, eh?"

Inspector Dunbar thrust forth a long finger at the shrinking form in the doorway.

"Mr. Soames," he said, "you will be going to your own room and waiting there until I ring for you."

"Yes, sir," said Soames, holding his hat in both hands and speaking huskily. "Yes, sir; certainly, sir."

He crossed the lobby and disappeared.

"There is no other way out, is there?" inquired the detective, glancing at Dr. Cumberly.

"There is no other way," was the reply, "but surely you don't suspect—" "I would suspect the archbishop of Westminster," snapped Dunbar, "if he came in like that! Now, sir—he turned to Leroux—"you were alone here tonight?"

"Quite alone, inspector. The truth is, I fear that my servants take liberties in the absence of my wife."

"In the absence of your wife? Where is your wife?"

"She is in Paris."

"Is she a Frenchwoman?"

"No; oh, no. But my wife is a painter, you understand, and—er—I met her in Paris—er—Must you insist upon these domestic particulars, Mr. Inspector?"

"If Mr. Exel is anxious to turn in," replied the inspector, "after his no doubt exhausting duties at the house, and if Dr. Cumberly—"

as the clock was chiming the last stroke of midnight."

"Then you would have walked up the street from an easterly direction?"

"Certainly."

"Did you meet any one or anything?"

"A taxicab, empty—for the hood was lowered—passed me as I turned the corner. There was no other vehicle in the street, and no person."

"You don't know from which door the cab came?"

"As I turned the corner," replied Exel, "I heard the man starting his engine, although when I actually saw the cab it was in motion, but judging by the sound to which I refer, the cab had been stationary, if not at the door of the next block, St. Andrew's mansions."

"Did you hear or see anything else?"

"I saw nothing whatever. But just as I approached the street door I heard a peculiar whistle, apparently proceeding from the gardens in the center of the square. I attached no importance to it at the time."

"What kind of whistle?"

"I have forgotten the actual notes, but the effect was very odd in some way."

"In what way?"

"An impression of this sort is not entirely reliable, inspector, but it struck me as oriental."

"Ah!" said Dunbar and reached out the long arm for his notebook.

"Can I be of any further assistance?" said Exel, glancing at his watch.

"You had entered the hallway and were about to enter your own flat when the voices of Dr. Cumberly and Mr. Leroux attracted your attention?"

"I actually had the key in my hand," replied Exel.

"Did you actually have the key in the lock?"

"Let me think," mused Exel, and he took out a bunch of keys and dangled them reflectively before his eyes. "No, I was fumbling for the right key when I heard the voices above me."

"But were you facing your door?"

"No," averred Exel, perceiving the drift of the inspector's inquiries. "I was facing the stairway the whole time, and, although it was in darkness, there is a street lamp immediately outside on the pavement, and I can swear positively that no one descended—that there was no one in the hall nor on the stair except Mr. Leroux and Dr. Cumberly."

"Have a brandy and soda?" suggested Dr. Cumberly, his eyes turned upon the pathetic face of the novelist.

But Leroux shook his head wearily.

"Go ahead, inspector!" he said. "I am anxious to tell you—I know. God knows I am anxious to tell you."

A sound was heard of a key being inserted in the lock of a door.

Four pairs of curious eyes were turned toward the entrance lobby, and with his hair cut low upon the cheek bones so as to give the impression of short side whiskers entered in a manner at once furtive and servile.

Abject terror was written upon his features and for a moment the idea of flight appeared to suggest itself urgently to him, but finally he took a step forward toward the study.

"Who's this?" snapped Dunbar without removing his leonine eyes from the newcomer.

"It is Soames" came the weary voice of Leroux.

"Butler?"

"Yes."

"Where's he been?"

"I don't know. He remained out without my permission."

"He did, eh?"

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Interjected Leroux. "The doctor has known me almost from boyhood, but—er—turning to the politician—"don't you know, Exel—no offense, no offense!"

"My dear Leroux," responded Exel hastily, "I am the offender. Permit me to wish you all good night."

He crossed the study and at the door paused and turned.

"Rely upon me, Leroux," he said, "to help in any way within my power."

He crossed the lobby, entered the outer door and departed.

"Now, Mr. Leroux," resumed Dunbar, "about this matter of your wife's absence."

CHAPTER III.
A Window Is Opened.

WHILE Henry Leroux collected his thoughts, Dr. Cumberly glanced across at the writing table where lay the fragment of paper which had been clutched in the dead woman's hand, then turned his head again toward the inspector, staring at him curiously. Since Dunbar had not yet attempted even to glance at the strange message, he wondered what had prompted the present line of inquiry.

"My wife," began Leroux, "shared a studio in Paris, at the time that I met her, with an American lady—a Miss Denise Ryland. You may know her name—but of course you don't, no! Well, my wife is herself quite clever with her brush; in fact, she has exhibited more than once at the Paris salon. We agreed—at the time of our—of our engagement—that she should be free to visit her old artistic friends in Paris at any time. You understand? There was to be no let or hindrance. Is this really necessary, Mr. Inspector?"

"Pray go on, Mr. Leroux."

"Well, you understand, it was a give and take arrangement; because I am afraid that I myself demand certain sacrifices from my wife—and—er—I did not feel entitled to interfere."

"Does she usually stay long?" inquired Dunbar.

"Not more than a week, as a rule," answered Leroux.

"You must excuse me," continued the detective, "if I seem to pry into intimate matters, but on these occasions, how does Mrs. Leroux get on for money?"

"I have opened a credit for her," explained the novelist wearily, "at the Credit Lyonnais, in Paris."

Dunbar scribbled busily in his notebook.

"Does she take her maid with her?" he jerked suddenly.

"She has no maid at the moment," replied Leroux. "She has been without one for twelve months or more now."

"When did you last hear from her?"

"Three days ago."

"Did you answer the letter?"

"Yes; my answer was among the mail which Soames took to the post tonight."

"You said, though, if I remember rightly, that he was out without permission?"

Leroux ran his fingers through his hair.

"I meant that he should only have been absent five minutes or so, while he remained out for more than an hour."

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Abject Terror Was Written Upon His Features.

upon the top of a bookcase without otherwise changing his position, and, glancing aside at Exel, said:

"Now, Mr. Exel, what help can you give us?"

"I have little to add to Dr. Cumberly's account," answered Exel offhandedly. "The whole thing seemed to me—"

"What it seemed," interrupted Dunbar, "does not interest Scotland Yard, Mr. Exel, and won't interest the jury."

"What do you want to know, then?" asked Exel.

"I will be wanting to know," said Dunbar, "where you were coming from tonight?"

"From the house of commons."

"You came direct?"

"I left Sir Brian Malpas at the corner of Victoria street at four minutes to 12 by Big Ben and walked straight home, exactly entering here from the street

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